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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, students of ancient languages have been taught to translate rather than read. The four most popular current approaches to language instruction--the grammar-translation method, the direct-reading or inductive approach, the audiolingual method, and the structural approach--all have inherent deficiencies that are magnified when applied to an ancient language. An innovative program produced by the Joint Association of Classical Teachers, entitled "Reading Greek," seems to combine the best features of these methods. Teachers should be aware that adults face these problems in learning an ancient language: (1) the need to have everything--especially non-Roman alphabets--carefully explained; (2) scarcity of time available for study; (3) absence of a living source informant; and (4) the question of relevance. The designer of a program should provide for extensive work on the alphabet, choice of a general vocabulary, structural analysis, work on memorizing techniques, structured drills, and a selection of readings that reflects the goals of each lesson. (JB)

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Adult Reading of Ancient Languages

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Learning ancient languages was recognized for a long time in our culture as a necessary prerequisite for the right to wear the label of an "educated person." Students were required to spend many hours, weeks, months, and even years memorizing vocabulary, paradigms, and rules of syntax in order to fulfill the requirements of the particular institutions they were attending. The main purpose behind this enforced regime of intellectual gymnastics was to enable students to translate into English the great masterpieces of Classical Civilization. Students involved in such a process very rarely acquired an ability to read the Classical languages per se. Instead, they were

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tested on their ability to identify grammatical forms, explain obscure syntactical relationships, and to translate from the ancient language into a highly-stylized English version, or into an awkward, literal English which showed the instructor that the students supposedly knew the language or at least the passage being translated. An additional exercise consisted of the translation of rather difficult and often meaningless English sentences into the ancient language. It was the accepted assumption that reading and translating were one and the same. This assumption naturally was passed on to the students, many of whom actually believed that they could read the languages they were studying.

In recent years learning an ancient language, and in some cases any foreign language at all, has been removed from the list of requirements of many institutions of higher learning. It should be clear, therefore, that without a captive audience the duty of instructors of the ancient languages today is to motivate potential students to begin the study of ancient languages. Once the students have made such a decision, the instructors must relate to the students in terms of their linguistic backgrounds and abilities as well as to their reasons for undertaking such a course of study. Failure to recognize the various capabilities and motivations of the students will result in lower enroloments, and the classes will consist only of highly-motivated language students and those who are required to study the language in question as part of their major program. Perhaps one of the best ways to motivate potential students and to maintain their presence in the classroom is to de-emphasize the traditional goals of grammatical analysis and translation into English and to emphasize the acquisition of a reading knowledge of the ancient language.

Using linguistic terminology translation may be defined as the transformation of the surface-structure of the target language into its deep-structure followed by the transformation of that deep-structure into the surface-structure of the native language of the translator. Reading, however, requires no transformation at all but rather consists of the immediate comprehension of the surface-structure of the target language without resorting to grammatical analysis or translation into another language. This does not mean that the art of translation has no use in the classroom of ancient languages; it is still a useful tool in the classroom as one method of testing the students' progress and comprehension. However, it should be recognized that the use of translation in the classroom is merely a tool and should not be confused with the goal, namely, the ability to read the language.

The instructional materials currently available for teaching ancient languages may be divided into four methodological groups: 1) the grammar-translation method (also referred to as the "traditional" method, 2) the direct-reading approach or inductive method, 3) the audio-lingual method, and 4) the structural approach. The following analysis will be restricted to textbooks of ancient Greek but may be applied to textbooks of any ancient language.

The basic underlying assumptions of textbooks using the grammar-translation method are that the students studying ancient Greek already have some knowledge of basic linguistic concepts, have a high motivation for studying ancient Greek, and have a highly-developed ability for memorizing morphological paradigms, long lists of vocabulary, and complex syntactical rules, assumptions which cannot be made for the average university student of today. The pedagogic approach used in the grammar-translation method consists of grammatical explanation and a few sample

Greek sentences illustrating the explanation, a list of new vocabulary words, paradigms to be memorized, translation exercises from Greek to English and from English to Greek, and after the first few lessons selected reading from Classical Greek literature. The readings, although supposedly selected because they illustrate the new grammar introduced in the individual lessons, often contain new words, forms, and constructions which the students have never seen before. Thus the readings, instead of reinforcing the students' acquisition of a reading ability, frustrate and discourage them in their efforts to make some sense out of the reading selections. There is very little, if any, meaningful drill for the new linguistic concepts introduced.

The basic underlying assumptions of textbooks employing the inductive method differ from those of the grammar-translation method mainly in the choice of the selected readings. Instead of choosing passages from various classical authors of ancient Greek literature, writers of inductive-method textbooks usually concentrate on one author and present the original text to the students from the very beginning. The vocabulary, morphology, and syntax to be learned is determined by the occurrence of these concepts in the work chosen. The main argument of the proponents of the inductive method is that students from the very beginning of their study acquire a sense of achievement, because they deal with an original text instead of the various, unconnected, graded, and often adapted readings which are usually found in books based on the grammar-translation method. This sense of achievement is, however, false and misleading, since even though they may have understood and translated the original text, the students are not required to gain proficiency in the language in general or to build a solid foundation in the basic linguistic concepts

of the language. The fact that students have managed to translate an original text accompanied by countless notes on vocabulary, morphology, and syntax does not necessarily mean that they have acquired a reading knowledge of the language and can transfer what they have learned from the textbook and apply it to a different author.

The underlying assumption of the audio-lingual approach is that adult students best learn ancient languages by imitating the educative process that children experience in learning their own native languages. Each unit in the text begins with a dialogue accompanied by an English translation. The students are expected to memorize the dialogue in Greek completely before they are told what any of the individual words mean or how any of the morphological and syntactical structures presented in the dialogue operate. Since ancient Greek is no longer spoken, everyday conversations are avoided, and the dialogues consist of selections from classical literature. The concepts contained in the ancient texts are rather complex and therefore do not seem to meet the need of providing a living, everyday context for conversation as is found in most modern-language textbooks. Students using such a program have found it very frustrating to try to memorize the dialogues presented in each unit, since they do not know the specific purposes for such memorization and often cannot even completely understand the English translation provided.

The basic misconception in the audio-lingual program is that adult students learn a new language the same way that children learn a language. Adult students, however, need a sense of direction, structured progress, and reinforcement of what is to be learned.

The audio-lingual method seems to be saying to the students: "Never mind what you are learning, you will find that out later."

The basic underlying assumption of the structural approach is that the adult students of ancient languages have no previous ability in basic linguistic analysis. New grammatical concepts are presented first with examples in both English and Greek. Next, a vocabulary list of new words is given followed by a series of exercises which provide drill for the new vocabulary, forms, and syntax in several ways: sight reading (translation into English), transformation of forms, matching words, rephrasing sentences to different contexts, and composition based upon modifying an already existing Greek sentence. Such a method seems to be headed in the right direction at least. However the structural approach is based on modern linguistic research and theory, and care must be taken not to emphasize the students' acquisition of a new English vocabulary of linguistic terms at the expense of learning to read the target language. While it is true that many of the traditional grammatical terms used for describing a language are not only out-of-date but also misleading and sometimes even incorrect, the teachers as well as the textbook writers must make sure that the grammatical explanations are clear and easily grasped by the students and are not presented merely to impress their colleagues and other linguists, a mistake which proponents of both the audio-lingual method and the structural approach often make.

A relatively recent and innovative program for teaching ancient Greek is the Joint Association of Classical Teachers' Greek course, Reading Greek. This course, which seems to combine the best features

of the other above-mentioned methods, will be used on an experimental basis at Brock University during the academic year 1981-1982 as a review text and reader for students in second-year Greek. The J.A.C.T. course seems to be heading in the right direction in preparing materials for modern, adult students, although there seems to be the same confusion of the ability to translate with the ability to read which is found in all the other programs.

In order to facilitate the adult students' acquisition of a reading ability of an ancient language it is necessary first of all to recognize the specific problems which the modern adult students have. Contrary to the assumption of the proponents of the audio-lingual approach, post-adolescent students need structure, explanation, and a purpose for learning linguistic concepts; they cannot effectively learn just by mimicry, chance, or osmosis; everything must be carefully explained and drilled. It is also necessary to take into consideration the fact that a foreign alphabet may cause great confusion in adult students. Considerable time and effort must be spent with adult students in overcoming the obstacle of the alphabet. Perhaps the best method available today for learning a foreign alphabet is the program used by H. Ducoff in the book <u>How to read Hebrew (and love it!)</u>. Although directed toward the learning and mastery of the modern Hebrew alphabet and pronunciation, the same method may easily be applied to any language, ancient or modern, which uses a different alphabet.

Another problem to be considered in the case of adult students is the amount of time the students have available for studying outside the classroom. Long assignments which do not actively drill the linguistic concepts under consideration should be avoided. The emphasis

must be placed on work which will reinforce the students' acquisition of the skill of learning to read the target language. A language is best learned if the students function in it. It is only those structures the students can generate which they can read easily.

A third problem which exists for students of ancient languages regardless of their age is the fact that ancient languages by definition have no living source informant. Such features as pronunciation, idiom, intonation patterns, and cultural background must of necessity be from a second-hand, non-native source.

The fourth, and perhaps the most important, problem facing adult students of ancient languages is the relevance of such courses of study to modern society. Potential students should be made aware that in addition to the obvious benefits of studying ancient languages, i.e. a better understanding of the literature, history, and culture of ancient civilizations, other benefits arise such as a better understanding of the English language as well as of one's self and one's culture by the exposure of the mind to a different civilization and to a different way of thinking and viewing the world, benefits which may also be derived from studying a modern language.

In designing an ancient language program for adult students in modern society it is essential that the material so designed lead to the enabling of the students to achieve the goals of reading an ancient language: complete comprehension without translating, ability to think in terms of the language structure and idiom, and a comprehension of and appreciation for the cultural differences between their own society and that of the ancient peoples.

In the past several years experiments have been conducted with the beginning students of ancient languages at Brock University. The following recommendations have been formulated: 1) If the alphabet of the target language is different from that of English, much time and effort must be spent in helping the students overcome the alphabet barrier. The emphasis in the first few weeks should be on acquiring fluency in pronunciation, reading words aloud, and writing the new characters. It might be helpful at this stage to use a system of transcription into the English alphabet to serve as a bridge between the two different writing systems.

2) The choice of vocabulary for the beginning stages of learning to read an ancient language should consist of concrete, easily identifiable objects and concepts. Highly specialized philosophical or theological vocabulary should be postponed until the students have a fairly firm comprehension of the structure of the language.

3) Student should be encouraged to analyze the target language structurally, not as an end in itself but as a tool which enables the students to understand the basic structural differences between English and the ancient language being studied.

4) Instructors should be willing to help the students with the special adult problems found in learning to memorize. The use of special seminars for students having difficulties may help in solving some of the individual problems.

5) Structured drills with clearly stated goals should form the majority of the classroom time as well as of the homework assignments. It should be remembered that reading an ancient language is a skill and that repetitious practice is essential in acquiring a skill.

6) The readings should be adapted to the goals of each lesson. Obscure and confusing passages should be avoided, and the emphasis of

the reading passages should be that they are the reward for the drills; i.e. if the students perform all the assigned drills properly they should be able to read and understand the reading passages easily, which is the goal of the program. An effective means of testing the comprehension of reading passages is the use of comprehension drills, i.e. questions in the ancient language which are to be answered in the ancient language. These comprehension drills should be performed before the reading passage is translated into English. If indeed the students understand the reading passage and are able to answer the questions accurately, there really is no need to translate the passage into English.

It should be a high priority for instructors of ancient languages to work on preparing language programs which will achieve the goals outlined above. Continued experimentation should be encouraged, and ineffective programs should be improved keeping in mind the purpose of increasing the accessibility of ancient language programs to adult students with little or no previous linguistic training, which will in turn lead to an increased awareness, understanding, and enjoyment of the ancient civilizations.

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